

CHRIST, THE VANQUISHER OF DEATH.

A Sermon

DELIVERED ON TUESDAY MORNING, JUNE 3, 1851,

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AT ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH, LOTHBURY.

"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."—JOHN xiv. 3.

It is much to be lamented, but little to be wondered at, that comparatively but slight attention is given to the great fact of our blessed Lord's ascension into heaven. Christmas-day, Good Friday, and Easter-day, are days universally observed by members of the Church; but Holy Thursday is scarcely known even by name to the great mass of Christians. It is evident that the Church attaches as much importance to that day as to the others; having appropriated proper psalms as well as lessons, and furnished a sacramental service. We have come, however, to neglect this ordinance of the Church; for whilst we stately assemble to commemorate the birth, death, and resurrection of our Lord, we omit the solemn gathering in remembrance of his ascension. And on this account, we think it right to fix your thoughts on the subject of Christ's departure from earth, that we may be led to accompany him as he rises on high "leading captivity captive." Having stood around the cradle, and followed him to Calvary, and seen him burst forth from the grave, we should complete the gorgeous contemplation by gazing on him as he ascends from Mount Olivet. Of course it is not the mere historical fact on which we intend to enlarge, but we intend to show you from the resurrection of Christ our own personal interest in that event, arguing our own resurrection from that of the Redeemer; so that in discoursing on the ascension of Christ, we would consider its consequences and its bearings on ourselves, seeing that St. Paul declared unto the Ephesians—"God hath quickened us together with Christ, and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus." The words which we have taken as our text will be deserving our attention; forasmuch as Christ announces one main object of his departure—an object with which we ourselves have the greatest concern—"I go to prepare a place for you." Neither is this the only part of the announcement interesting to ourselves. Christ speaks to his disciples not only of departing to "prepare a place for them," but of his "returning to receive them to himself." So that we learn that the departure is not to be final, but that there is to be a second advent—an advent fraught with great blessing to the Christian. Let us take these as our topics of discourse. The first is, that our Lord in leaving his disciples accomplished that majestic ascent which the Church has recently commemorated; and next, let us glance at the rich promises which he makes to the believer. Let us consider them separately, with prayer to God that we may understand their meaning and apprehend their force. The first assertion has to do with the object of his departure; the second, that he departs to "prepare a place for his followers," and that he will "return to receive them unto himself, that where he is they may be also."

"I go to prepare a place for you." Was, then, heaven not prepared until Christ "ascended up on high, and led captivity captive?" In every age, multitudes had been saved through faith in the promised Redeemer, and had no home been ready to receive them on their departure from the earth? On the contrary, we read that the righteous are bidden to take possession of "a kingdom prepared for them from the foundations of the world;" and we cannot therefore suppose that heaven had no mansions prepared before the Mediator died. But we may justly say, that heaven did not assume its peculiar character as the dwelling-place of redeemed creatures until the Redeemer himself had entered its precincts. The glorified humanity of Christ, which cannot be in two places at once, fixes by its presence the position of heaven, and at the same time gives it its magnificence. I know not what heaven, or the place of separate spirits, might have been ere "the mystery of godliness" was revealed, and "the Word made flesh" effected on the cross the redemption of our world—I know not whether prophets, and patriarchs, and saints, who "having beheld the promise afar off" had been gathered within its confines, obtained at first a full revelation of all which was faintly shadowed out upon earth; or whether their imperfect knowledge continued till the everlasting doors were thrown open, and the Conqueror entered who had "spoiled principalities and powers." But of this we can be sure, that there was a difference not to be measured between heaven before and heaven after the accomplishment of human salvation. It could hardly (if we may venture the expression) be considered as the same place, since until it contained "the Lamb that was slain" it contained not that which makes heaven to those who had forfeited their immortality. "Absent from the body, present with the Lord," is what the Christian can now affirm in the prospect of dissolution; but this is what could not have been affirmed until our forerunner passed within the vail. Well, then, might it be said by the Redeemer, "I go to prepare a place for you." "I go to give its beauty unto Paradise—its lustre to the eternal city; I go to light up with the brightness of my presence the 'many mansions' of my Father's house. This humanity, which heretofore was only the vehicle of suffering, shall be as a column of fire in the midst of the kingdom, and communicate its appropriate splendour to the whole region wherein redeemed men shall dwell." This it was to prepare and make ready heaven, to ascend triumphantly the mediatorial throne, that he might be a well-spring of joy, and a fountain of glory to the vast multitudes purchased by his blood. There could be no heaven to such as ourselves without Christ. Heaven would be no heaven without him; and consequently, on entering heaven, Christ "prepared a place" for his disciples.

But does our Lord say nothing as to the place, except that he will "prepare" it? Has he no description to give? Indeed, in the preceding verse he has used words on which we may linger awhile; for they are full of beauty and promise—"In my Father's house are many mansions." Perhaps you may not see much description in these words; yet ponder them, and you will see that they are radiant with the future. We would dwell a little on the word "mansions"; and we ought to be encouraged, that in heaven there shall be no inconsiderable number. What idea does the word "mansions" convey? It ought to give that of the permanence and continuance of the heavenly state. But it is very easy to overlook this in our translation; not because the translation is incorrect but because the word is used in a sense which is now obsolete. When we speak of a "mansion," we are accustomed to understand a superior kind of dwelling—a habitation of larger than common dimensions, if not of architectural splendour; but this is not at all the original meaning of the word. The word "mansion" properly denotes that which remains, or abides, or is fixed. This is also the exact meaning of the Greek word which we here translate "mansion." Thus when, according to the English version, St. Paul in his epistle to the Hebrews says—"Here we have no continuing city," he employs a word of the same derivation as that under review. And therefore when

Christ affirms that "in his Father's house there are many mansions," he is not to be considered as asserting either the grandeur or the glory of those abodes, which shall be finally shared among his followers; but rather as declaring that the abodes in which his followers are to dwell are such as shall remain, and shall be to them continuing habitations, as opposed to their present temporary dwellings.

And we need hardly tell you, that after gathering into the descriptions of future blessedness whatever Scripture presents to us as most attractive and brilliant and inspiring, the crowning thing of all is, that this blessedness is eternal. To place a limit to the duration of this blessedness would be to take away what gives it its greatest worth to creatures constituted as ourselves; just as the supposing a time when misery shall have an end, would be to make the thought of hell comparatively tolerable. So soon as heaven is once entered there is no possibility of removal; and our remaining within its circuit will not be at all dependent on our passing through new states of probation. Once within "the city that hath foundation" and we are within it for ever. There will be the tree in the midst of that city as well as in the midst of the first Paradise. And if there shall be "many mansions" in the place which Christ hath "gone to prepare" for his followers, you ought also to observe that there will be only one "house." "In my Father's house are many mansions." As though Christ had said, there is room for as many as shall enter; and there shall be but one roof over all. There is something very beautiful in these representations of the innumerable company of the redeemed, as constituting one household throughout eternity. It is melancholy to think how the visible Church of Christ has been divided and rent, so that the aspect of those who equally profess Christianity is as far removed as possible from that of friendship. The slightest cause seems sufficient for the violation of that brotherhood of feeling which ought to subsist amongst men, and far more amongst Christians; so that there is not one-thousandth part of the zeal in avoiding offences that there is in magnifying the importance of whatever might be a plea for division. Nothing of these divisions and separations shall follow us into eternity. We are all to be inmates of the same house—all to find ourselves beneath the same roof.

I dwell with great delight on the words, "In my Father's house." You cannot use words in which there is more, so to speak, of domestic imagery; and when you combine these words with those of Christ to Mary after his resurrection—"I ascend unto my Father and unto your Father"—we have a right to speak of heaven as the house of *our* Father: and can you, we again ask, devise words more expressive of all that appeals most to our affections and our hopes? It is just giving a kind of home character to heaven to call it "our Father's house;" it is investing the inheritance of the saints with all that touching sacredness, and with all those warm and rich associations which we feel to belong to that dwelling which sheltered us in our infancy, and where we first knew the interchange of the heart's purest charities. We do not believe that there is one of you, whatever his age or his condition—whether too young to have left the parental roof, or having long ago ceased to have a father upon earth—we do not believe there is one of you who does not feel the force of the simple words—"my Father's house;" in whom they do not awaken emotions of tenderness, if not unmingled with sadness; not one of you whom they do not carry back to the spot where his best joys are still to be found, or which is consecrated by the hallowed memory of peaceful days and affectionate relatives. What, then, is it to describe heaven as "our Father's house," but to give to the future habitations of the blessed, all the blandness and beauty of the scenery of home, and to affirm the complete absence of all those causes of division and all those jealousies and strifes which have here so often broken the Church of the Redeemer into parties and factions.

Oh! brethren, I ask not to be told of the splendid and the gorgeous adornments with which the roof of heaven shall be inlaid—enough for me that there is only one roof over

all the inhabitants. I may not have faculties for scanning and surveying the noble vault which canopies the celestial chambers, but I can feel, and it is a feeling of the most perfect peace, that these chambers make up one boundless—one everlasting home. The representations of the future which address themselves most to the heart, are not those which are gorgeous with the gold and the precious stones, or those most radiant with images of beauty; these are the most dazzling, but not the most penetrating; and the heart is to be reached by what breathes most of universal love. Yes! poetry, in its longings for something on which to pour the full splendour of its imagery, might seize on the word “mansions,” and throw into its lofty measure the wall of sapphire and the gate of pearl; yet if the soul’s deepest chords are to be swept, then must we hear of the repose of home, and of those hallowed charities which weave themselves into the family circle. And, as we now stand by the Redeemer on Mount Olivet, as he is about to bestow his parting blessing—for it was in the act of blessing his disciples that he was parted from them—ought it not to satisfy—ought it not to be to us a touching, thrilling, animating thing, that it is immediately after declaring “in my Father’s house are many mansions,” he said, “I go to prepare a place for you?”

But enough on the first assertion of our text, that which has to do with the object of Christ’s departure. We now pass to that which speaks of his return—“I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also.” You should observe the peculiarity of the expression. Christ represents himself as *coming to fetch his people*; he does not send for them, he “comes again to receive them unto himself.” No doubt the reference is to that which we emphatically call the second advent of Christ, when the Redeemer shall descend in glorious majesty to earth; and finally deliver his saints from the bondage of death. But we may give to the expression more of an immediate and individual character; we may justly consider that our blessed Lord refers to the day of the believer’s death, for if so soon as we are “absent from the body we are present with the Lord,” we may regard it as being to each of us the coming of Christ. And if it be at death that Christ takes us to himself, then the expression of our text is most intimately associated with the Saviour in the act of dissolution. What a delineation to give to death—“I will come again, and receive you unto myself!” The text is thus, in some degree, parallel with the description given by Christ himself in the book of Revelation,—“I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death.” “*The keys of hell and death.*” The keys, that is, of Hades, or the invisible world, and of death. We are taught that having come forth from the grave, Christ hath been invested with supremacy over death, so that, though he may allow it still to reign, it is only as a servant. It strikes some men as improbable, that if Christ have abolished it, there should be still no destruction of the grave. It would seem to have been expected, they say, that the grave would be closed when death was vanquished; whereas, the victory of the Redeemer made no visible difference. The mandate is still in full force—“Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return;” and if Christ come again at death “to receive his followers unto himself,” death is now nothing more than an instrument in the hands of the Redeemer. There is no power in death but what is wielded by the Mediator’s sovereignty. The grave is committed as an instrument to the Mediator’s hands, to be closed or opened as he may appoint. This is to strip death of much of its terror—it is only an instrument which the Saviour employs. It is not the tyrant whom our imagination would depict, mowing down with resistless fury the old and the young of human kind; death cannot come on the believer till Christ himself come to “receive that believer to himself.” The Saviour turns the key, ere the soul can break away from corruption. It gives a dignity and a greatness to death, to find the glorified Mediator thus concerned with it. There is so much that is ignoble; so much of what is dishonouring in the act of dissolution, that we regard it with abhorrence, and turn from it as most

loathsome. But if we think, when a man dies, that illustrious Being "for whom are all things, and by whom are all things"—whose "name is that at which every knee does homage," has been distinctly charged with freeing the soul from corruption; this gives a new aspect, an aspect of grandeur as well as of solemnity, and invests the passing out of life with mysterious importance which should make us forget all the accompaniments of shame and reproach. You visit the sick man's chamber, and you see nothing in the emaciated being but a sad spectacle of the ruin wrought by sin; and you compute that when disease has made a little more way, the fever reached a certain crisis, and the strength been shattered by another relapse, there will be nothing left but that survivors may bury their dead. This—who can deny it?—this is wondrously humiliating! What becomes of mediation, when we see a fellow-creature withered and wasted, and know that he is but the image of what we ourselves must soon be? And yet let us carry with us into the chamber the truths derived from our text; and death itself will become glorious, and dissolution sublime. Tell us not of another stage of disease, of a more intense degree of fever! The immortal soul must be ennobled when in the hands of him who has spread out the firmament and spangled it with worlds; and he it is who has turned the key and unlocked eternity, who says—"I will come again, and receive you unto myself." Tell us not of the failing pulse and the impeded breathing; we behold nothing but the rolling back of the ponderous gate through which the Mediator passed, we bear nothing but the removing of one bar after another, each immovable till touched by him who built the universe. This gives a sort of majesty to dying! I forget the sickness, the faintness, the pain, the ghastliness, when I think that that personage who is described as "King of kings and Lord of lords," the awful splendour of whose aspect struck dumb St. John, who is employed in dissolving the union between body and soul, loosening the cordage that binds spirit to matter, is he who says—"I will come again, and take you unto myself."

It might be a degrading thing if it were through the mere process of disease that we passed into another state; but I could almost call it a noble thing, when we remember that Christ himself, "the brightness of his Father's glory, and the express image of his person," must open the avenue to the admission of the immortal principle. "'I have the keys of death;' I am 'Lord over all things to the church.' The grave is included in my dominion; and though there seem a thousand inlets to that dark abode, no solitary being can enter its confines unless I be present and remove the bars." It is, in short, a part of the Mediatorial function that Christ should officiate at every man's death. "He comes to receive us unto himself." It is this, we say, that gives a majesty to dying. Can that be ignoble; can that be shameful, which cannot take place without, not merely the consent, but the direct interference of the "Lord our Redeemer?" Imagine the funeral of some unknown pauper—some child of wretchedness, who, with no friend to close his eyes, no relative to mourn his loss, has breathed his last in a lonely hovel, and is being hurried to an obscure grave. He has left no blank in society; he will never be missed by his fellow-men; no tongue will ever ask for him, as no eye ever weeps. Can anything be of less importance than his death; anything of less interest? He died neglected and uncared for. Privation and disease had eaten away his strength; and he went out of life as one hunted by calamity, and at last clutched in its fangs. Can anything be more humiliating, more degrading to our common nature, than his death? But we know who stood by that pauper in the act of dissolution; we know whose command is passed ere the soul of that pauper could struggle loose from flesh. Poverty could not kill him, and pain could not kill. It is a hard achievement, that of dying! His obscurity, his loneliness, his desertion—these could not make his death an event of no moment. The loosening of an immortal spirit is too weighty a cause to depend on the circumstances of the transition. I cannot call that unimportant which employs the Redeemer; I cannot call that dishonouring which was submitted to

by the "Lord of Glory" himself! Nay, rather, as you reckon up the humiliating facts, and would persuade us that the departure of this miserable being is an inconsiderable thing, taking place in the course of nature, and therefore scarcely worth a thought, we fasten attention on the sublime saying of Christ, and this despised and overlooked man, whose corpse is being hurriedly consigned to its mother earth, comes before us as the object of the Mediator's guardianship; and his dissolution, which you would represent as so base, is invested with grandeur, because impossible, except through the very agency which will hereafter bring him back from the dust; and I lose all feeling but that of its being an awfully great thing to die, when I hear that voice which also said, "I have the keys of death," saying to his disciples, to console them for his departure from earth, "I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also."

Now, we would observe that this fact of Christ's coming again to receive us to himself, should make us regard with calmness our own approaching dissolution, and "bear with meekness" the removal of our friends. It is not, you see, a matter of chance or accident—the passage of the immortal soul from time into eternity. It is so completely effected by the Redeemer, that the invisible world is barred against us till he shall turn the key and unlock the door. Who, then, will deny that death comes at the right time, and that the grave is never opened to the believer but when it would be injury that it should be closed? An untimely death! These are heathenish words, though often found on Christian tongues. I cannot die prematurely; I cannot die accidentally, for I cannot die till Christ come to "receive me unto himself." He must turn the key, and bid the spirit go forth. If we were to judge by the restlessness and uneasiness which men so often display in reference to death, or by their almost insufferable sorrow over the buried objects of their love, we might conclude that they considered the pathway to the grave as not under a gracious superintendence. Indeed, it is a solemn thing to die; and we mean not that any process of thought should so strip death of all awfulness, as to cause its presence to excite no emotions. But as there ought to be calmness in the anticipation of our own death, so should there be quiet resignation on that of our friends, when we think in whose hands is the key of the grave. There are glorious portals to pass ere we can reach the eternal home; but can that be a dishonouring custody in submitting to which we place ourselves in the keeping of the Mediator? And if we choose to call the grave a prison, where, at least, is our faith, if we cannot trust ourselves in a prison with Christ for the jailor? I know that death cannot touch me until he is commanded by my Saviour; I know that he cannot enter my household and take away one I love, unless the very being who "bore my griefs, and carried my sorrows," send him on the mission. And this ought to subdue alarm in reference to my own departure out of life, and soothe my anguish if those whom I cherish go before me to the grave. There may be a harsh grating noise in the unlocking that gate which stands at the entrance to the invisible world; but if we only thought of the hand by which the key is being turned, there might be something almost musical in the sound. And Christ is Lord both of the visible and invisible, and as he dismisses from the one he admits to the other. I cannot follow the flight of the spirit in that mysterious moment when it comes forth unloosed from the body, and when the spirit is being dissociated from matter, but I know who it is that comes to receive that spirit to himself; I know that it is not left alone to wander over unexplored tracts seeking a resting-place; but that with one hand the Mediator unbars the door through which the soul escapes from earth, and with the other, at the same instant—for he has the keys of *Hades* and of death—he throws open the Paradise, where are the spirits of the just. It is an exquisitely beautiful and comforting thing that all this is done by the Mediator; not by an angel, but by One whose nature allowed of his being touched with "the feeling of our infirmities"—

One who has himself died and descended into *Hades*; who knows, therefore, what sustainments are needed by those who have to make the unexplored passage. We cannot wonder at the triumphant assurance which is often manifested by righteous men as they depart out of life. It may be that in the act of dissolution—for in truth, we know nothing of the act of dissolution—we may have our surmises and conjectures, but it remains a problem which only an appeal to experience can solve what it is to die;—it may be, that in the act of dissolution consolations are whispered to the soul by him who hath come to take that soul to himself. And the solacing words, “It is I; be not afraid,” may be falling on the ear, though it is almost closed against the voice of human friendship. Yes, the nearness to Christ, into which the believer must be brought in the act of death—the nearness, inasmuch as he has come again to “receive him to himself,” may well cause that the last earthly feeling may be—“O Lord, how great and wonderful it is to die!”

And though our text may be true especially of the believer, we are not to suppose it without force and reasoning even for the wicked. Christ may come again at their death; yea, if he hold the keys of death, there must be his agency in their death, as well as in that of his own “peculiar people.” Alas! then, for the wicked! They have resisted Christ; they have kept him out of their thoughts; they have disliked the mention of his name; and now it is his hand—the hand which was pierced for them, which has held out to them the olive branch from which they refused to receive eternal life,—which is now unfastening the door, and forcing them away from every object in which they have taken delight. We know not whether there shall be any manifestation to the soul convincing it who that Being is who thus detaches it from flesh; but inasmuch as Christ has the keys of *Hades* as well as of death, we may readily believe that in entering the spiritual state the soul will be made conscious of the presence of the Redeemer. In all the imagery of future woe, there is nothing more thrilling than the simple representation that it will be Christ who unbars the prison-house that lost souls may enter. Give any being as keeper of the key and opener of the dungeon rather than this!—give a fiend, who shall seem at home, and whose malice and malignity shall be proportioned to the part to be performed!—give the fiercest of that apostate company whose grand effort has been to involve men in their misery, and who will therefore find a mixture of triumph and gladness in closing on them the door that they may exclude hope!—give any being rather than one who died on purpose to save men from suffering! Yet thus it must be! It is Christ who saith—“I, I who loved sinners, and gave myself for sinners, and endured agony for sinners, ‘I will come again and receive them;’ I have the keys of *Hades* and of death.”

Oh! we can believe we might bear anything rather than this. To the righteous it will minister ineffable satisfaction that Christ admits them into Paradise. What shall this do but make the gift doubly precious; but to be consigned to perdition by the very Being who died to avert that perdition; to have to pass to the place of torment in the custody of him who shrank from no anguish, but submitted to the most overwhelming woe that the ruined might be ransomed; to have the key of the dungeon turned on them by a gracious deliverer, who came from heaven to earth that he might set free the prisoners—will not this inconceivably enhance the wretchedness of the lost? Oh! the remorse of conscience, when that arm which was made bare for the working out salvation, shall execute judgment! It comes not within the power of imagination to depict that look which Christ cast on Peter when he had thrice shamefully denied him, and which at once subdued the coward apostle, and forced from him burning tears of contrition; and far less can we paint the countenance of the Redeemer when he shall come again to release the soul from flesh, but not to take that soul eternally to himself. It must be more eloquent of slighted love, more expressive of malignant reproach, more characterized by righteous indignation. But if we cannot delineate the look, we can

believe,—oh! who can refuse to believe?—that it will be less terrible, less agonising, to pass along the fiery glare of vindictive spirits than to meet the eye of the Redeemer, eloquent of rejected mercy. Oh, it is this fact, the fact that the Mediator shall come again to receive men from earth, which seems to make me feel the power of that cry which is heard from those who are invoking the rocks and hills to fall on them—“Hide us from the face, from the face of him that sitteth on the throne.” Why from the face? save that they are to be forced to meet the indescribable, terrible, reproachful glance of him who said to his disciples—“I will come again and take you unto myself.”

For a moment we linger on the concluding words of our text—“That where I am, there you may be also.” They agree with what we have before alleged as to its being the presence of the glorified Christ which makes heaven to the Christian. Would it make heaven to us? does it meet our desires? does it correspond with what we already feel to be heaven—that we “should be for ever with the Lord?” We should try ourselves by this test, for assuredly if it be no present delight to us to be in communion with Christ, we have no right to suppose ourselves on the road to that kingdom where such communion is to be the portion of the blessed and redeemed. Christ is indeed “gone to prepare a place for us.” We have lately followed him as he ascended up on high and took his post at “the right hand of God.” And if heaven is prepared for us, how mighty is the question—Are we being prepared for heaven? There shall in no wise, we are told, enter into it anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, but only they who are “written in the Lamb’s book of life.” Then what is the preparation? By what processes shall they who are defiled by sin enter where there shall “enter nothing which defileth?” Blessed be God! he who hath gone to “prepare a place” ever liveth to prepare the inhabitants. We have got a “High Priest of our profession” who hath passed into heaven, whose blood it is that cleanseth, and his spirit that sanctifieth. Oh, that we may labour heartily to “make our calling and election sure!” and so an entrance shall be ministered to us abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.